

[Jacob Stein]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER B. Hathaway

ADDRESS 356 West 123rd St. New York

DATE Dec. 27, 1938

SUBJECT FOLK LORE (UNION SQUARE) - JACOB STEIN

1. Date and time of interview Dec. 5, 1938
2. Place of interview Union Square
3. Name and address of informant Jacob Stein, of lower East Side, Habitus of Union Square.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Picture a city park two or three blocks square. Picture it perched on stilts some four feet above the surrounding street level, with wide plazas, green swards, walks, benches and

Library of Congress

the like, making an ideal lounge for those who wish to gather there. Picture it still further, as a meeting place for New York's nearest approach to a [proletariate?]

Picture all this and you, a stranger, say, may get some inkling of the resort that is today Union Square, a sort of diminutive Hyde Park set in the very heart of the ancient Island of the Manhattoes, one of the oldest parts of the old city.

Dating back to —, the little square at Fourteenth Street and Broadway has had a picturesque history, but no part of it more so perhaps than that which began with the last great depression.

Here, on its stilts, day in and day in and day out one may see the same faces, with only slight changes as time goes on, in seething controversy, not to say rancour — strife, brawls, even fist fights. Anywhere up to two hundred persons gather here daily, weather permitting, composed of home relievers, South Ferry broadliners, dips, bums, sightseers, members of all political faiths, a few degenerates.

What brings them here, how they got that way, might tax the mind of the socially curious. Mainly, however, I think it is the desire for self expression. As an outdoor forum the Square affords an opportunity to become vocal, to be artistically articulate — in a minor way, to be sure — in the same way that one might whistle a tune, whittle a drygoods box, do a folkstory, or play a [Paderewiski?] on the violin if he is able.

Some of them, it is true, have something to sell — an idea or a periodical. Others may be overzealous in support of this or that person or ism now “cutting ice” in Europe. But all express themselves in one way or another.

Here, by this park bench, a solid hour at a stretch, a group will watch, with silent concentration, a park artist doin doing a charcoal sketch of some lounge for twenty-five cents, in which they can have no interest whatever. They are killing time. “Career men,” so to speak, in the pleasant art of doing nothing.

Library of Congress

In a word, it would seem, they come to loaf, express themselves or be diverted.

As a social institution, however, one must believe that the “Square” is strictly a depression phenomenon. During periods of prosperity — unless, as some say, prosperity is a thing of the past, mediaeval, to be seen of man no more (pish-posh!) — during periods of prosperity, no crowds gather here, or anywhere else for that matter. They 3 are practically all employed — those who are not, not troubling themselves to gather anywhere.....

As one looks over the wrangling, shifting mob, he will see perhaps the largest group deciding the fate of Germany and the man with the little mustache. The Italians, in a group by themselves, are telling the tale of their own pet dictator, with rather more against than for. Jugo-Slavs, Czecho-Slavs, in their own tongue — Karl Marx. Discussions ranging from Mary Baker Eddy, theosophy and the Bible to private grievances; but dominated, on the whole, I should say, by that faith, or group, that has redesignated the park “Red Square,” after the famous plaza in Moscow.

Undisturbed by police, except to clear a passageway through the crowd now and then, or compose a quarrel, here they meet, regardless of quorum or parliamentary form, to pass the time, express or divert themselves, during a period of enforced idleness.

They have no outlook, as a rule — least of all, an uplook. A modest “get-by” is the most they can expect from life. They are misplaced parts in the social machinery. For the moment, at any rate.

Which of course, is not a reason why they should be permitted to remain so. In a way “Union Square” is an indictment of society....

But that is another question. The story here is the folklore of Jacob Stein.

Library of Congress

***** Note: —Each of the folk tales that follow on Union Square will be referred to Jacob Stein (which should be numbered one in this group) with such details added in each case as may serve to make clear the particular story.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER B. Hathaway

ADDRESS 356 West 123rd St. New York

DATE December 27, 1938

SUBJECT FOLK LORE (UNION SQUARE) - JACOB STEIN

1. Ancestry Russo-Jewish
2. Place and date of birth Poland, in old Russia, 1888
3. Family Single
4. Places lived in, with dates Poland until 17 years of age. Came to New York in 1905, where he has lived on the lower East Side during most of his 33 years in this country.
5. Education, with dates

Mostly in the hard school of experience. Formal Education, very little. Attended school neither in Poland nor U. S. Learned to read English here, by his own efforts.

Library of Congress

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

No religious activities, but is a theist and markedly anti-radical.

9. Description of informant Poorly-clad, medium height, gaunt, well-shaped features, with a humorous glint in his eye and a ready smile. On home relief Lost his WPA job, together with green uniforms picking up paper with sharp stick in Union Square.

10. Other Points gained in interview

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER B. Hathaway

ADDRESS 356 West 123rd St. New York

DATE December 27, 1938

SUBJECT FOLK LORE (UNION SQUARE) - JACOB STEIN In a facetious, heckling group of his own, that grew and waned with his own exertions, he gave expression to his grievances— JACOB STEIN

Library of Congress

Whadda yi think! Mike the Boss. He wanted to put me in the crazy house! What for? For him I worked in the primary. I got all the Italian vote lined up for him. He was defeated. Now he says I'm crazy. Tried to put me in the nut house! What kind psychologie (a little difficulty with the word) is that? For him he got working crazy people?.....

Me? (interruption) I was in the crazy house? I never was in the crazy house. Mike the Boss sent you here. I was only in Bel-le-vue for a few days and they turned me loose. Said was nothing wrong with me.....

What they said to me in Bel-le-vue?

O-o-oh, they only felt my pulse, kicked me in the shins a time or two, to see I got good feelings. Then they told me could I add up sums in addition....One of the doctors jobbed his finger at me —

Just like that (stabbing at the nearest man's eye). You're President Roosevelt! he hollered at me. Right in my face...

What I said? I said: Yer a cock-eyed liar!...

Then they turned me loose. They said: nothing wrong with this man.

2

Bring here the people what sent him. See, maybe they're crazy.

Say, listen! (interruption) That's what Mike the Boss said, when he had me looked up. He said I was six months in the crazy house. Mike the Boss' gang all supported him in the primary. He got beat. Six of his guerillas was arrested for distributing marked ballots. He wanted a goat. I was the goat...

How I got looked up? I'll tell you how.

Library of Congress

Primary day it was raining. I was standing there, a hundred feet from the polls, according to law, with a Mike the Boss sign on. A big sign. With big letters all over: vote for Mike the Boss an' Save your Jobs. I had an umbrella that belonged to Mike's Club.

As I was standing there, a feller with a Mike the Boss button on came up to me and wanted to borrow the umbrella. It wasn't mine. I couldn't lend it to him. He had a lotta ballots in his hand. You know, sample ballots for distribution.

Then he says: here, hold these ballots. Keep 'em dry for a minute. So I held 'em for him. I thought it was all right. He had a Mike the Boss button on.

Then he went away. An' never come back anymore. In a couple minutes, up comes a cop an' arrests me. Said the ballots was marked. Illegal. I was locked up. Also the cop locked up about six of Mike's guerillas for distributing marked ballots.

In Magistrates' Court the guerillas all swore I gave 'em the ballots an' that they didn't know they were marked. I never gave nobody any ballots. I I was just holdin' 'em for the guy that never come back. Mike the Boss wanted somebody to throw the blame on. So he told the judge I had been in the crazy house an' didn't know what I was doin'.

The judge says to me: are you crazy? I says I will be if I work for this gang any longer. Everybody laughed. The judge laughed an' everybody in court.

3

Well, the judge didn't know who to believe. They all swore I had been in the crazy house. It was their word against mine.

The six guerillas was turned loose. I was held for Special Sessions. The case is still pending. I lost my WPA job. An' now I'm a bum....